NEW
NICK CARTER
WEEKLY

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THE CRIME BEHIND THE THRONE

OR NICK CARTER AND THE PALACE MYSTERY

The Grand Duke leaped back with a cry of amazement and anger, for, when the screen fell with a crash, Nick Carter stood smiling before him.

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THE CRIME BEHIND THE THRONE;

OR,

Nick Carter and the Palace Mystery.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

KILLED IN THE ROOM BEHIND THE THRONE.

While Nick Carter was dressing a telegram was given to him, and, breaking the seal, he read:

"A repetition of several mysterious crimes occurred here last night. If possible, come to St. Petersburg by first train. Will meet you at Russian border, German side. Come as a personal favor to me. Answer."

The message was signed "Charles Malet," and after reading it through a second time and casting it upon the table in front of him, Nick stood with frowning brow contemplating nothing while he determined the problem occasioned by the telegram.

The principle question he was called upon to determine was if he could spare the time to accede to the request of his friend, who had in the past done many favors for him, and for whom, aside from the obligations he had incurred, he held a strong and sincere affection.

The "Little Giant" had just arrived in Paris from St. Petersburg. He had not yet been in the French capital eight full hours. He had fully accomplished the purpose that had taken him into Russia, which was to deliver to the czar in person, a message from the Mikado of Japan and secure his personal reply.

This he had accomplished in the face of difficulties which had seemed to be almost insurmountable. But it had been consummated. The letter, written by the czar's own hand to the mikado, was in the detective's pocket at that very moment, and he felt that it was his plain duty to deliver it without delay into the hands of the Emperor of Japan.

On the other hand, was the summons from his friend Malet, and—well, he felt that he must favor Malet if

possible; Malet, whose real name was O'Malley, and whom Nick regarded as one of the strongest, bravest and keenest men he had ever known in the secret service profession; Malet, who had been a trusted agent for two Czars of Russia before the present one succeeded to the throne; Malet, who, although a Galway Irishman, had lived for years in Paris and St. Petersburg until he had become so continentalized that he could pass without trouble for either a Frenchman or a Russian; Malet, who had been his good friend in many an extremity.

"I will go," he said aloud, although addressing himself. "It won't take long, doubtless. I have secured this answer from the czar at least two weeks before I expected to do so. The answer itself is unfavorable, and it can wait. Yes, I will go."

He rang the bell and called an attendant to him.

From him he quickly ascertained the time of the departure of trains via Berlin, etc., and within thirty minutes from the time he received the message from Malet, an affirmative reply was forwarded.

"I have two hours before the train starts," he continued. "That will give me time to call upon the chief of police of Paris, return here for my grip, and catch the train."

His business with the Paris chief was to leave the message to the mikado in his care, and, that done, with specific directions how to act in case of his non-return before a certain time, he returned to his hotel only to find that another message awaited him.

This time it was in the form of a letter, and one glance told him it was written by the Countess Yvonne de Tierney.

"My dear Mr. Carter," it said. "I am just in receipt of such terrible news, and my eyes are so filled with tears that I can scarcely write. Information has just reached me that my sister, Marie, Princess Stevanislous, has been foully murdered. I am overwhelmed with grief. I do not know any of the particulars save that she was found in the same room where three other crimes of the same character have been perpetrated—it is called the room behind the throne, because it is in that room where privileged persons wait for special audience with the czar. I am so distrait that I cannot write. I am certain of only one thing, which is that I shall again dare all the terrors of Russia and again thrust myself into the bear's embrace, for I shall return to Russia forthwith.

"You told me when we parted that you intended to travel post haste to Japan, and I do not know even if you will receive this letter.

"Oh, that it were possible for you to return to Russia with me! I should feel so safe with you near at hand. But I do not ask it, for I know the impossibility. Your duty lies in a different direction.

"This letter, therefore, is to bid you good-by, in case the worst should happen and I should never return, or be heard more from again.

"But, if I should disappear from the face of the earth, you alone will know what has become of me; you alone will know that I am a prisoner in Siberia, for you alone are my confidant in this determination of mine to go to Russia.

"I shall go in disguise. I know a way to cross the border, I think. I am sure that I will not be known or my disguise suspected. Good-by."

The letter was signed "Yvonne de Tierney," and while Nick was refolding it, he was also thinking:

"Nothing could alter her determination to go, and so it will be better for all concerned that I do not inform her of my intention to go also." Then he smiled, as he added: "If I had not already wired Malet of my intention to go to him, I would do so now."

Nick did not concern himself about the question of passports, for he knew that Malet would be prepared to take him across the border, but he was particular to arrive at the station from which the train started, considerably before the scheduled time, and, having adopted a disguise that he had not appeared in before, in Paris, he loitered about and inspected with care every passenger who arrived to take his or her place upon the train, in the hope that he would see and recognize the countess.

In this, however, he was mistaken, for in not one of the arrivals did he discover one who might even be imagined to be Yvonne; and when the train started he was convinced that she was not a passenger upon it.

"Either she has taken the train ahead of this one or

she will not start till the next one," he thought: "But, perhaps, after all, she has given up the mad idea of going at all. I hope so."

When he descended from the train at the border, almost the first person he discovered was Malet, who was awaiting him; but he did not at once make himself known. Instead, he drew himself into the background and inspected every passenger who got down, thinking that he might have overlooked Yvonne in Paris, and that if he had done so, he would discover her now.

But she did not appear.

One by one the passengers passed into the inspection box, where their passports were inspected, and from thence on through the huge iron gate which was the passageway between Germany and Russia, and still there was a throng left on the German side of the boundary.

It was then that Nick approached Malet and touched him on the arm.

"So!" said Malet, turning. "Well, I did not in the least expect to know you when you arrived, so you have not surprised me." Then he laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" inquired Nick.

"Sure," said Malet, in English, "I have seen you many times in many disguises, but faith this is the first time I ever saw you made up as a woman."

"It isn't the first time I have done it," said Nick.

"Oh, I know that; who better? Not a livin' man on the train would suspect you, either. You look the part all right, although your voice is a trifle heavy."

"Well, how is this?" asked Nick, altering his voice with quickness and ease so that it sounded exactly like the rich contralto of a woman.

"Sure, Nick, it's foine. Faith, I might forget meself and be making eyes at ye before we get to the capital if you speak to me in that tone of voice. But, what the divil——"

"Oh, I thought it would be easier, that's all. Now, how do you get me across to the train for St. Petersburg? Must I go somewhere and change back to a man?"

"Not at all. I have a pass for myself and one, and sure it doesn't say whether the one is a man or a woman. Come ahead. We'll go through the office instead of that pen. Have you any baggage?"

"Only this grip. You will have to provide me with whatever else I need; only I do not care to have your police examining the contents of this."

"Then give it to me. Good. Now come ahead."

Seated in a compartment by themselves soon after that, while the train was speeding toward St. Petersburg, Nick began the conversation.

"Well, Malet," he said, "will you tell me how it happens that Princess Marie Theresa, who was supposed to be quarantined in her palace, two leagues away from St. Petersburg, could manage to get herself murdered in the room behind the throne, in the imperial palace?"

Malet turned his head and stared at Nick in amazement.

"Sure, Nick," he said, "I begin to think you are a wizard after all."

"Not at all, Malet. You telegraphed me that a crime had been committed, and that it is a repetition of others like it. I happen to know about the others. At the same time I received a note from the Countess de Tierney which tells me that her sister has been murdered in the room behind the throne. There is nothing strange about my knowledge there, is there?"

"No. Sure you are here then at the request of Countess Yvonne as well as mine, eh?"

"No. She did not even ask me to come, and she does not know that I am here."

"I'm glad of that. I don't want anybody to know it."

"Did you wire the countess?"

"No."

"Who did?"

"I don't know."

"Prince Ivan, her sister's husband, perhaps."

"Not a bit of it, for Prince Ivan does not yet know that his wife is dead."

"How is that?"

"Simply because at the time his wife was struck down, or at about the same time, he was nearly mur

dered himself, and he is so near death's door that nobody has thought best to tell him about it. Listen and I'll give you the story."

CHAPTER II.

MALET'S VERSION OF THE DOUBLE CRIME.

"You have been in the little room that is known as the room behind the throne, haven't you?" asked Malet.

"Yes, often."

"Then you know that it is used only by people who are especially favored, and who are to be admitted to private audience with the czar?"

"Yes."

"Well, altogether, since the death of the princess, four persons have been found there, murdered. Two in the time of the last Alexander, and two since Nicholas."

"Yes."

"And not a trace of the person or persons who have committed those crimes has ever been discovered."

"So I have been told."

"The unsavory reputation of the room has given it a black eye so that it has not been used for a long time. Nicholas doesn't like to have it used at all, and when he is told of this crime, he'll have it nailed up, I'm thinking."

"Do you mean to say that he has not been told?"

"Nobody has been told."

"Eh? What?"

"It was the captain of the guard who discovered the body. He kept his mouth shut and came at once to me. I called the palace doctor, and his assistant and the four of us went to the room. Then we spirited the body away, had it embalmed and placed in a secret vault, and then I wired for you."

"But look here, Malet! Who telegraphed to the Countess Yvonne?"

"You can search me, Nick."

"Would either of the doctors do it?"

"Not on your life! Not after my orders."

"Or the captain of the guard?"

"Nay—nay, Pauline!"

"Or you?"

"Well, not quite, I'm thinking."

"And you are the only persons, save the one who killed her, who knows that she is dead, or that this crime behind the throne has been committed."

"That's about the size of it."

"Humph!" said Nick. "Look here, Malet, I might as well tell you—or better, you can read the letter. Here it is. Yvonne is determined to come here herself."

"She can't," said Malet, taking the letter in his hand and beginning to read it. When he had read it through to the end, he gave it back, whereupon Nick immediately tore it into little bits and threw them out of the window of the rushing train.

"She's plucky, isn't she?" said Malet.

"Very," replied Nick.

"But she cannot get across the border now."

"Why not?"

"Well, maybe she can, but I'm thinking she can't."

"I should have gone to see her before I started," said Nick, "but I really did not have the time if I was to catch that train. She would have shown me her message."

"Perhaps. Anyhow, you didn't see it."

"I say, Malet, could there be any doubt about the identity of the murdered woman? I mean, are you dead certain that it was the princess?"

"Sure I am. I know her by sight as well as I know my own reflection in the glass. It was the princess, sure enough."

"And how was she killed?"

"Choked. Strangled."

"And you say that the prince was attacked at about the same time?"

"Yes; as near as I can figure it out."

"How was he wounded?"

"With a knife between his ribs."

"And where was he attacked?"

"On the steps in front of his office just as he was leaving it for the day."

"What time was it?"

"Between five and six in the evening. It was dark

—quite dark, and for some reason the electric light over the door was not burning. The carbon had not worked down so that the current could leap the space. It might have been caught up by accident, or it might have been fixed by the man who stabbed the prince."

"Now, Malet, what does the captain of the guard know about the presence of the princess in the room behind the throne?"

"Merely that she applied to him about half-past four o'clock, gave him her card and told him that her husband had arranged a private audience for her with the czar. She said that his majesty had directed that she should wait in the room behind the throne from half-past four until he summoned her to him."

"I see. Now, when did the captain of the guard discover her body?"

"At half-past six."

"How did he happen to find it?"

"Well, she had been there two hours. He knows that the czar seldom keeps people waiting long when he has made a special appointment, and that an hour should have accomplished the whole thing, the interview as well as the waiting for it to take place. He began to worry about six o'clock; at half-past six he entered the room. She was lying back on one corner of the couch where she had seated herself when he showed her into the room, and he saw at a glance, not only that she was dead, but that she had been killed in the same way as the others who had met with death in that room. Then he left her just as he found her, locked the door after him and went in search of me. I was in the palace at the time, and I was in the room behind the throne within fifteen minutes from the time Boris discovered her."

"Boris is the name of the captain?"

"Yes."

"How long a time had the princess been dead when you saw her?"

"Not more than an hour."

"What was the impression you received of the crime when you saw her?"

"Why, it looked to me as if she had been attacked from behind and that the thing that choked her, whatever it was, came upon her entirely unawares."

"Why do you say the thing that choked her?"

"Because her throat looked to me as if she had been choked with a string or a small bit of rope; not with the clinched fingers of a man's hands."

"Did she see the czar?"

"No. It is plain to me that she was lured to that room to be killed, for she did not even have an appointment with his majesty. The czar has not heard that she desired an appointment with him. I questioned him very carefully, but I am certain of that much."

"Then the only evidence we have that she had an appointment with the czar, is what she told the captain of the guard, Boris. Or, rather, what he says she told him."

"Yes. You can rely upon what Boris says, too. He's all right. I know him. Suspicion cannot light upon Boris, not for a minute. He is one of my own men, and you know me. I haven't a man in my outfit who hasn't been tried thoroughly, and there isn't one of them to whom I would not willingly trust my life, if necessary, and at any moment. In short, Nick, I have just as much faith in Boris as you have in Chick."

"Then that settles that, doesn't it?"

"Rather."

"What have you done about the room where she was killed?"

"I have given orders to Boris that on no account was he to admit any person to it again without my orders, given direct, no matter who that person might happen to be. I doubt if the grand duke himself could enter it unless I said the word. Boris has a way of carrying orders out to the letter, when he gets them from me."

"Now, what is known about the attack upon Prince Ivan?"

"Nothing more than I have told you. He stepped out of his office and paused at the top steps, just outside the building. He was wondering why the light was out, and was on the point of going back to give orders that it be attended to when the assassin leaped upon him from behind, drove the knife between his ribs and

escaped. The prince did not even see his assailant. He does not know whether it was a man or a woman. In fact, he knows no more about it than I do, and I have told you all I know."

"Now, why did you send for me?"

"Because I cannot find a clew to work on. Because I've got to admit that I am as helpless in these two cases as a babe in dresses. Because the thing has got to be worked out and the author of each crime found, and I cannot do it. I think you can. You see, Nick, I have taken a great responsibility in concealing the fact of the princess' death. I'll be not only forgiven, but applauded for it if I find out who killed her; if I do not, I'll have to get out of Russia, that's all, and I've got too soft a job here to give it up lightly."

"Right you are, Charley. I think we will find a way to work out the mysteries."

"Bet your life we will, now that you are here. If you had declined to come, I think I would have resigned, and gone back to Paris."

"Nonsense. Malet!"

"Fact. I have felt, since this thing happened, just as if my hands were tied."

"I never knew you to be rattled before, Malet."

"Well, I am a little that way now, I'll confess, just because I haven't even got a theory. I never knew a case before where at the very start I felt so many different emotions. For instance, I can't get it out of my head that the two crimes were committed by the same hand, and yet there are about a million reasons why that is utterly impossible."

"To be sure there are; and yet it is not impossible."

"I think it is. Look here. In the first place, the woman was strangled and the man was wounded with a knife and will probably die. In the second place, the two incidents must have happened within a very short time of each other, and it is a good fifteen minutes walk from the palace to the office of the Third Section. In the third place, not a living soul could have entered the room behind the throne after the woman went into it, until we found her, without being seen by Boris—couldn't have entered or come out of it, for he swears that there was not a moment when his eyes were not on that door while she was in there, until he went to find me."

"And that was at half-past six?"

"Yes. Almost an hour after the prince was stabbed half a mile away."

"Well?"

"All this goes to prove that I'm a fool, doesn't it?"

"How so?"

"Why, it is manifestly impossible that the two crimes could have been committed by the same hand—I have told myself that thing a hundred times—and yet I'm such a dolt and idiot that I can't get the idea out of my head, and I knew that I would be simpleton enough to work on that theory in spite of everything. That is why I sent for you. I tell you, old chap, that when a man who has been a detective all his life reaches the point where he won't let his reason convince his heart of the error of an idea, it is time that he sent for help, gave up the business, and started a peanut stand on the corner somewhere. That's the way I feel about it, anyhow."

Nick laughed aloud.

"Tell me what you have in your mind that supports your notion that the same hand committed both crimes," he said.

"Not a thing."

"Oh, yes, you have. Come. Out with it."

"Nothing, I tell you. Honest Injun! It's just a crazy idea, nothing else."

"It is easy matter to fix the time when the prince was stabbed, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes; almost to a minute."

"But it is another question in reference to the princess."

"Quite."

"Well, then, the fact is that she might have been strangled almost immediately after she entered that room; or, in other words, almost an hour before her husband was stabbed. Isn't that so? The only difficulty in the way of your theory seems to me to be the seeming impossibility for the person who did it,

to have entered or left the room without being seen by Boris. It may be that you are not such a dolt after all. Anyhow, we'll find out, eh?"

CHAPTER III.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE ASSASSIN.

It was nearly midnight when Nick Carter and Malet arrived at the imperial palace, but the detective had gone first with his friend to a room which Malet called his laboratory, since it contained every kind and description of paraphernalia which might become available in the way of disguises, and there, the distinguished-looking woman, who had traveled with Malet from the border station, disappeared, and when Nick accompanied his friend to the palace he was arrayed in the uniform of a guard of the palace.

They repaired at once to the room of the captain of the guard, Boris, and from there the three went together to the room behind the throne.

When the lights were turned on, Nick confronted his companions and said:

"Now, my friends, I want you to go out of the room and lock the door after you, and I want the word of honor of each one of you that neither of you will disturb me. I want to be alone, and I want to be left alone just as long as I please to remain so. Do you understand, Malet?"

"Well, how long, eh? An hour?"

"No matter whether it is an hour or ten hours, I do not wish to be disturbed until I rap on the door to summon you. Is that agreed?"

"You don't expect to remain in here ten hours, do you, Carter?" asked Malet.

"No. But if I do not rap for you before that, I want you to leave me alone, just the same.

"Oh, all right. Only after everything that has happened in this room, I shall get nervous if you are here too long."

"Then get nervous, but don't bother me."

They left the room reluctantly, and as soon as the detective heard the key turn in the lock, he crossed to the huge, upholstered couch where the princess had been seated when she was strangled, and threw himself upon it to think.

He recalled a time while Czar Alexander was alive, when he had been seated and waiting in that same room for an audience with him, and he remembered a remark that had been made by the herculean emperor on that occasion.

"There are more ways than one to get to me through that room," he had said. "It was arranged for the convenience of my grandfather. Some day I may send for you to help me find out the secrets of it, for I was never told; neither, I believe, was my august father."

But Nick's work was done when the remark was made to him, and he was in a hurry to return to New York, so he had paid little attention to the remark. On the train, while talking with Malet, it had recurred to him, and that is why he desired to be left in the room alone, and with the promise that he would not be interrupted.

"Alexander was no fool," he mused. "He was almost as smart as he was big and strong, although the world has never given him credit for it. His remark meant, if it meant anything at all, that he knew there was one or more secret entrances to this room, and, moreover, that he had looked for them and could not find them. Now, I'm fairly good at that sort of thing, and I'll have a try at it. But, first, let me have a look at the room itself."

It was not a large room, being, say, fifteen feet square. The walls were paneled in heavy oak and without decoration of any kind, nor was there a picture of any description against them. The ceiling was of the same material. The floor was carpeted, and the carpet was nailed down. It was also quite old, and showed wear in front of the chairs and the couch on which he was seated.

Plainly the carpet had not been disturbed in a long time—for years.

The furniture was massive, but quite ordinary. It consisted of the couch, half a dozen huge, high-backed chairs, an immense sideboard with a high, frowning top that reached nearly to the ceiling, and upon which there was a complement of decanters and glasses—for

decoration, doubtless, since they were empty—and a huge, heavy, square, oak table in the center of the room.

That was all. There wasn't another thing in the room, and it looked a bare and hopelessly thankless place enough to await an audience with an emperor—and, alas! how many had waited there hopelessly in the past! What histories that room could have related had it been gifted with speech!

"If there is a secret entrance here," mused Nick, "it is through one or more of those panels, or it is behind that sideboard. Now, if Alexander looked for a secret entrance, he would have reasoned the same that I do now, and, therefore, he has doubtless searched in both places. He has sounded the panels, and he has removed the sideboard and searched behind it, so I won't waste my time searching in those places until I have looked elsewhere."

He rose from the couch and ran his fingers down behind the upholstering between the seat and the back, but, instead of searching along from one end to the other as another would have done, he secured a firm hold and pulled upward.

For a moment the seat resisted his efforts, but he believed that it gave a little, and so he applied all his strength to it.

Another instant it seemed to resist, and then it came 'oose in his hands with a snap that told him something had broken, and he straightened up, pulling the entire seat with him.

"Somewhere," he mused, smiling to himself, "there is a spring, which, if I had touched it, would have released the catch that I have broken. But the thing is open, anyhow."

He found that he had uncovered a boxlike receptacle that had been concealed beneath the seat of the couch. It ran the full length and width of the piece of furniture, but was necessarily quite shallow.

But it was the array of articles he discovered there which interested him most, for the first thing his eyes rested upon was a long, slender, woven linen cord. Not a common twisted cord, such as one ordinarily sees anywhere, but a cord that had been made by hand, and woven, so that it would be strong and pliable. In short, it was exactly like the cords that are made and used by East Indian stranglers, save in the one fact that it had been woven of linen instead of hemp.

He took it from the box and examined it carefully.

"Whoever it was who strangled the princess," he mused, "he knew that this cord was here, and he also knew the secret of the spring of this settee. More than that, after the strangling act was consummated, he removed the body from the couch long enough to return the cord to its place, and then——"

Nick halted in his speculations.

"How in the world did he get hold of the cord in the first place?" he asked himself. "By putting the cord there after he strangled her, he as much as assured me that it was there before he strangled her. Now, Boris says that she was seated on this piece of furniture, and it is likely that she remained there until she was attacked. If the cord was under the seat while she was there, how did the strangler secure it? Wait. Let me look at the other things here."

These were not interesting at first, although significant.

There was a loaded revolver of American make, and of the bulldog pattern. There were two long, slender, dirk knives. There was a length of wire rope, covered with rubber and about fourteen inches long—a murderous club in the hands of a strong man, and there was a piece a gas pipe, plugged at either end with a fuse connected at one of the ends, which unmistakably suggested a bomb, and the detective smiled grimly.

"Plainly," he said, "the assassin had a choice of weapons for his work; but the point of it all is that he was obliged to get into this thing upon which the princess was seated, before he could attack her. I think I'll turn this settee over and have a look at the bottom of it."

He stepped to one end of the couch and seized hold of it, but, although Nick Carter could lift a horse with a man seated in the saddle, he could not budge that settee. He exerted every whit of his wonderful strength, but it remained in its place as firm as a rock.

It was as steadfastly there as if it had been a part of the palace building.

"That's funny," said Nick. "Whatever happens, it is evident that this thing was put here to stay. I can't move it, that's certain, and there isn't a screw or a fastening in——"

He ceased suddenly, and taking his knife from his pocket, ran the blade underneath the carved feet of the couch.

"Humph!" he said, then, straightening up. "There are iron rods inside those legs, and they run straight through the floor to the room beneath. I wonder what sort of a room is under this one? Well, I'll have to work without knowing, for I won't call Malet—yet. There is something under here, that is dead sure, and it is almost equally as sure that there is a way of communicating with that room. But how and where?"

He took hold of the couch and tried to shake it. It did not move. He tried the arms and then the back, but the effect was the same. Then he gave his attention again to the inside of the box that the seat concealed when closed.

I have mentioned every article that he found inside it save the screws with which the bottom appeared to be fastened. There were five of those, and he opened the screwdriver in his knife and attacked them, beginning at the right-hand corner.

In that manner he removed four of the screws, one from each corner. The fifth remained, and that was in the center, and he found after he had turned it out to what should have been its full height, that, although it still turned readily enough, it refused to come any farther.

Convinced that it would not release itself, he seized upon it and pulled—and then he stared in amazement at what he saw.

The screw upon which he had seized, flew back out of his hand and the entire bottom of the box with its miscellaneous contents of murderous instruments as well as the screw itself, from which he had relinquished his hold, glided silently downward out of sight.

That section of the floor which formed an oblong square under the couch inside the four carved legs upon which it rested, followed by the bottom of the boxlike seat, had gone downward into black darkness, and, although he got down upon the floor and leaned with his head into the opening, he could see nothing.

Again he ran the blade of his knife underneath the carved feet of the settee, but this time it touched no iron, and an examination showed him that the inside half of each leg had gone down with the rods.

"Why!" he exclaimed, rising to his feet, "it's all as plain as a pikestaff now. That spring that I found, works from underneath as well as here. It opens the way into the room, as well as supplies the means of killing whether a person is seated upon the couch or not. One need not know that the seat itself can be raised, unless one is shut in this room and wants to get out. Capital! I'll close down the seat of the couch and go on an exploring expedition, and I'll give Malet the worst scare he has ever had in his life."

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE END OF THE SECRET PASSAGE.

Nick shut down the seat cover of the Davenport and had the satisfaction of knowing that the catch he had broken in opening it, had dropped back into place, so that it would require quite as much strength as he had employed in the first place in order to reopen it.

Then, after turning off the electric lights one by one, he produced his pocket light, and, having adjusted the buttom so that it would give continuous light, he directed the rays into what appeared to be an abyss before him.

But it proved to be no abyss at all.

The bottom of the box, with its array of weapons—he had transferred the strangling cord to one of his pockets—was only about six feet below him, and it seemed to rest in a part of the flooring of the lower room which was exceedingly shallow; but as he flashed the light around the gloomy place, he discovered that there was an abundance of room on either side of the box, and so returning the light to his pocket for a moment, he seized the sides of the hole and lowered himself into it.

He could readily stand upright when once he was there, and the light told him that he was in a narrow corridor-like place that was undoubtedly made between the partitions of the palace, and that it stretched away in the darkness farther than his light could penetrate.

"I've got plenty of time," he mused, "and I'll just see if there is a plain way out of this place before I close the way by which I entered," and he started along the narrow way.

There was no impediment to his progress until he had advanced at least sixty or seventy feet, and then he came to the end; and there he discovered a door. It was locked, to be sure, but a key hung against the wall beside it.

Opening the door, he discovered still another corridor of the same pattern, and leaving the door ajar, he traversed that one in the same manner; then there came a third, then a fourth, and at the end of each he found a key hanging on either side of the door so that they could readily be opened from either side.

It isn't plain why they have taken the trouble to lock the doors at all since they have provided keys on both sides," he murmured. "However, that is an unimportant point. Now to see if there is a fifth corridor between the partitions beyond this door."

He opened it and at once gave a little whistle of astonishment, for he found himself in a place which he instantly recognized, for it was the little house outside the palace walls which he had had occasion to make use of more than once. Already he knew of another secret passage from that little house, for he had only lately had occasion to make use of it.*

But he knew his way now, and accordingly he returned without delay through the passages to the point underneath the room behind the throne.

It was a very simple matter to work the spring now, that he knew exactly where it was located, and a slight pull upon the screw head set it in motion, and he saw the box with its pistol and knives and bomb, rise upward into place and leave him alone in the vaultlike corridor.

His next effort was to discover how it worked from the lower side, but a glance told him that, for he had only to pull sharply upon the rod with which the screw was connected, and the box came downward again in front of him.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Now I've got a little surprise in store for Malet. And a little good news, too, for it seems certain that the theory that he thought was so foolish, was the right one after all. The hand that strangled the princess also drove the knife into her husband's side. There is no doubt of that in my mind now. It is another thing to discover whose hand it was, however; and yet—ah!"

He remembered the telegram that Yvonne had referred to in her letter.

"The sender of that message was, of course, the murderer," he mused. "Now if I could only find her and know who sent the information. Malet thinks she won't be able to cross the border, but I believe she will. She is a woman who is hard to stop when once she gets started on an idea."

He turned away and retraversed the passages, closing and locking each door behind him as he had found them, and returning each key to the nail where it had hung before he disturbed it, and presently he found himself in the little house outside the palace wall.

This little house contained only two rooms. It was a small, low, ramshackle affair, built of stone, and it had occupied its present position since the recollection of the oldest inhabitant of the city. Legend said that it had appeared quite as old and forsaken then, as now. It was never inhabited, because such were the express orders of the police. Certain members of the palace guard were known to keep a few things there, and one room had been fitted up as an emergency outside office for the chief of the guard, Malet. Nobody who had not business there ever approached it, because the few who had dared to do so in the long ago had been severely dealt with; others did not care to take the risk.

Nick now knew two ways into the palace through that little house and he did not doubt that there were more. These two were so cleverly concealed that they

* See No. 364 of the New Nick Carter Weekly.

could defy the most ingenious to find them, and there might be others after the same pattern. One of these that were known to him was the one he had just traversed; the other was a secret means of going directly to the czar when he was in his private library, and was the means employed by Malet when the czar desired private and secret audience with him.

When Nick emerged from the secret passage into the little house, and closed the hidden entrance behind him, he first made sure that he would be able to find it again without difficulty, and then he stepped into the second room—the one which Malet used sometimes as a retiring room and office—and seated himself to think.

He had extinguished his light, and was sitting in utter darkness save for the glimmer of skylight that sifted through the cob-webbed windows.

But he had been there only a very few moments when he heard a scratching sound at the outer door, and, rising, he cautiously entered the adjoining room, and approaching the door, bent his head to listen.

He was not mistaken.

There was some person on the other side of the door, and whoever that person was, he was trying to get into the house without a key; in other words, he was trying to pick the lock.

"All right," said Nick to himself, "I don't much believe that you are the person whom I most desire to see, for, if you were, you would have a key to that door and not be wasting your time in picking the lock. But you are somebody, and I'll wait and see who."

He returned to the inner room and seated himself in the chair again; but he left the door between the rooms ajar, and he sat so that he could command a view of the entire outer room. There were four windows in that outside room, and it was much lighter than the one where he was seated, so he was in comparative security.

"I'll let him enter," mused Nick, "and see what he is up to. Then, when he has betrayed himself, I'll capture him and ask him a few question. Anyhow, I'm glad I'm here."

The picking and scratching at the lock continued for a long time, and evidently with only a small degree of success; and then, suddenly, he heard the tumblers work, and the detective knew that the effort of the intruder had been successful after all.

Then the door opened, and in the light thus afforded against the opening, Nick saw a man—or was it a boy?—of small and slender stature, cross the threshold.

He had only time to see that the person, whoever it was, wore some sort of a uniform, when the door was closed again.

Then he heard the newcomer tiptoe across the floor, and for a moment his form was outlined against one of the windows.

Yes, it was a uniform he wore, and in that less than half light Nick thought he recognized the uniform worn by the guards in the railway service. Indeed, he was almost sure that it was the same.

Then the slight figure passed on into the darkness again, and presently emerged into more light from another window, where it hung against the wall in exactly the place where the secret entrance to the passageway that led to the private library of the czar was located.

"By Jove!" thought Nick. "The fellow seems to know what he is about. I wonder if I have inadvertently lighted upon a plot to assassinate the emperor, and have by sheer luck worked my way to this spot just in time to prevent it? Anyhow, I'll wait and see what he is up to."

The figure paused in front of the wall where the secret entrance was located and began feeling over it with his hands in the dark.

Evidently investigation of that sort was unsatisfactory, for presently he desisted, and in another instant, somewhat to Nick's surprise, he had struck a match and with it lighted a small, old-fashioned bull's-eye lantern.

"If he happens to turn that thing in this direction," thought Nick, "he'll discover me to a certainty, and then we will have to have it out without delay."

But the intruder did no such thing. His whole mind seemed to be on the one desire to find his way into the secret entrance, and he did not even flash his light around the room to study his surroundings. He turned

it instantly against the wall, and bent his entire attention to studying that.

"He doesn't know exactly where that spring is," was the detective's mental comment, "but he has got an amazingly good idea of its approximate location. He has had his light on the spot half a dozen times already. If he'd only follow that spot of light with his fingers and press everywhere the light touches the wall, he'd find it in a jiffy. It makes me want to offer my assistance, just to watch him."

He heard a sigh of vexation, but not a sound above that. There was no grumbling or cursing at the continued failure, and Nick rather wondered at that; still he watched on.

Fully half an hour must have been consumed in that way, and then the listening detective heard a suppressed exclamation, and—the secret door flew open.

Still the detective did not move from his position.

The way before the stranger was evidently unknown. It was undoubtedly, Nick thought, his first visit there, for he raised the light over his head and sent its rays shooting into the darkness of the passageway.

Then he did rather a remarkable thing, for he recrossed the room to the other door and actually spent almost as much time in relocking it as he had done in gaining admittance in the first place.

This was the very opportunity that Nick wished for, and he rose silently from his chair, glided swiftly and noiselessly across the floor to the secret passage, and stood there.

Then the figure with the bull's-eye light turned. He crossed the room and again threw his light into the secret passage.

And then he uttered a wild, shrill cry that was almost a scream, for the eye of the lantern was fixed squarely upon the disguised face of Nick Carter, standing before him.

CHAPTER V.

THE APPARITION IN THE DARK.

The involuntary cry that issued from the lips of the person in the uniform of a railway guard was as replete with anger, rage and desperation, as with surprise and fright, for the eye of the lantern had revealed the bearded face and coarse countenance of a Russian policeman.

With the cry, the intruder leaped backward, and, no doubt, sought to draw a weapon of some kind, and more than likely would have done so, and used it, moreover, and so made it fare ill for Nick Carter had he not been too quick for the consummation of the act.

But if the uniformed individual with the lantern was startled, so was Nick.

True, the point of light was shining full in his eyes and he could see nothing; but he could hear! And that sudden cry that rang through the room, and which was so like a scream, was in itself a revelation—for the cry was, indeed, a scream, and it issued from the lips of a woman.

It had scarcely found utterance when the detective leaped forward and seized her with a firm grasp, and, without exerting more than a moiety of his strength, pinioned her arms to her sides and held her there so that they stood facing each other in the dark. The lantern had clattered to the floor, and the shock of falling had extinguished it.

For an instant the woman in his grasp struggled faintly to escape, but perceiving that the effort was useless, she desisted and remained passive, waiting for him to speak—and when he did so he felt her form relax so that it became almost limp, and he heard a sigh of infinite relief escape from her.

"Countess Yvonne," he said, in his own natural tones so that she could not mistake them, "I am Nick Carter. Be brave now and do not faint. You would not have fainted if I were really a Russian policeman; you would have fought me tooth and nail. There! That is right. Brace up! This is a strange place to meet, is it not? So soon after we were here together before, too."*

He really feared that she was on the point of fainting in his arms, from the reaction of having recognized a friend instead of an enemy, and so he talked on almost at random in order to give her time to recover; and presently her sinews stiffened again, and he knew that

*See No. 380 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

the same brave little woman, who had demonstrated her courage in the past, had lost none of her resolute daring.

"Is it really you?" she asked.

"Yes, it is really I."

"You received my letter in Paris, and you came here in spite of all? Oh, how shall I ever thank you? How shall I ever thank you?"

"Easily, countess."

"Don't call me countess. I don't like it for one thing, and it might betray me for another, if the title should be heard. Call me by my given name. Now tell me how I can thank you."

"By placing yourself absolutely under my orders, by obeying me in every particular, and by leaving me to perform every act that you came here to accomplish yourself."

"Oh, yes," she said, with a sigh of infinite relief. "That is so easy—now—that you are here. Yes, I will obey you."

"How did you get here, Yvonne? How did you cross the frontier?"

"I bribed one of the guards. He supplied me with a uniform, and he concealed me in one of the compartments while we crossed the frontier. The officers looked in upon me, but he told them that I was an extra guard who had been suddenly taken ill."

"Then you were on the same train that brought me here, after all."

"Yes. I suppose so. We arrived at half-past eleven; but I did not see you."

"Did you see Malet at the border station?"

"Yes. He was talking with a woman."

"The woman was myself, Yvonne."

The countess laughed in a low tone, greatly amused.

"Isn't it strange," she said. "We both came here on the same train: you as a woman, and I as a man, and neither suspected the presence of the other."

"Now, tell me, Yvonne, what did you intend to do in this case? Why were you trying to get into the palace?"

"I was going to see the czar."

"But why?"

"Ah! who can tell just why? It was an idea I had. When I saw him last—when you took me to him through this same little house, I saw you defy him and compel him to do your will. I believed that I could do the same thing."

"You are a brave little woman, but also a very foolish one. What did you intend to compel him to do?"

"To give me safe conduct within the city. To help me to find the murderer of my sister. To permit me to see her in death even though I could not see her while she lived. Ah! I do not know, only that I was determined, if he refused me, to——" She paused.

"To do what, Yvonne?"

"To kill him."

"Come," said Nick, leading her into the other room, where there were two chairs. "We are not likely to be disturbed here—for a time at least. Now control yourself. Don't weep, my friend. Your sister, we are told, is dead; but you must not permit the thought to unnerve you now, when you have been so very brave up to this point. There. That is better. Now, tell me: Who sent you the message that told you of her death?"

"Her husband. Prince Ivan."

"The devil he did! I beg your pardon. You mean that his name was signed to the message."

"Yes. Just the name Ivan."

"Yvonne, he does not even know that his wife is dead."

"Bah!" replied Yvonne, with a bitter little laugh. "It is far more likely that he killed her than that he does not know of her death."

"Have you not heard that he was also nearly killed?"

"Yes. I heard it afterward: after I arrived here. That was merely a coincidence. One of his enemies has struck him down at last, after waiting, doubtless, for years to do it. It is only a coincidence that the blow happened to be struck so soon after he had murdered his wife; or, perhaps, he was less on his guard than usual, owing to what he had just accomplished. I know the man."

"Still I do not agree with you. Another sent the message to you and signed his name to it. I do not think that he knows that his wife is dead. The czar

does not know of the crime. Nobody knows about it. Malet, Boris, who is the captain of the guard, myself and two doctors are the only persons beside yourself who know of the circumstance. Now, Yvonne, there is much for us to do and the time is short. We will leave discussion until another hour. Did you bring any woman's apparel with you?"

"No. I could not."

"And did you expect that men's eyes could not see through your disguise in the daylight? Did you expect to remain unrecognized in St. Petersburg?"

"No. I intended to keep out of sight, or, if possible, to purchase what things I needed."

"Do you remember Malet's little hotel, where I took you once?"

"Yes."

"We will go there now. I will leave you there and you must remain in your room until I give you permission to leave it. To-morrow I will disguise you so you would not know your own self in the glass. It is only a short distance. Come. After I have cared for you, I must return to the palace."

They went out of the little house together, crossed the street and ascended it on the opposite side. At the top of the street they encountered two officers who paid them very little attention, for Nick's uniform as a member of the palace guard protected him from inquiry. At the same time he was conscious that they eyed him and his companion sharply, and after they had traversed some of the distance to their destination, he also discovered that one of the officers was following.

Nevertheless, he gave the subject no further thought than to attribute their watchfulness to the ordinary routine of their duty, and so he paid no attention to them.

Arrived at the hotel, he discovered to his surprise that the hour was after four in the morning, and he smiled when he remembered how anxious Malet and Boris must be becoming by this time.

"We must make haste," he said.

There was no difficulty in arousing Madam Malet, who recalled [illegible] Yvonne; and then Nick hurried back to the palace.

He applied at the wicket where the palace guards reported before they were admitted to their duties, and was, of course, stopped there; but upon assuring the sentinal that he desired only to communicate with the chief, who was then in the palace and would be found in the room of Capt. Boris, a messenger was quickly dispatched to summon him. In the meantime Nick was shown into a little side room to await his coming.

Presently Malet came.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded, roughly. "I am very busy—good lord! Where in the dev—— How in thunder did you get here?"

"Walked," replied Nick, laconically, smiling at Malet's dismay.

"But I have the key to the room behind the throne. You are locked in there. You are not here at all. You are there. They have killed you also, and this is your ghost. It must be! Honestly, Nick, I was never so done up in my life. Tell me how you did it?"

"I think, Malet," said Nick, quietly, "that your theory was the correct one, after all. You thought it foolish and believed that you were losing your senses, but your detective instinct was not at fault. Let us return there. Give the key to Boris and tell him to call me. I will remain in the background so that I can watch him without being seen. I want to observe him when he discovers that I am missing. Afterward we will let him lock us in that room together, and we will leave the palace by another route than the one you ordinarily make use of."

But Boris stood the test manfully. When he opened the door and found that the room was apparently undisturbed, and yet that the detective had utterly disappeared, his knees knocked together in abject fright, and for a moment it seemed as if he would fall to the floor, but he recovered himself and turned to see Nick standing beside him.

"Lock us both in here together now," said Nick, "and forget that we are here, for we shall not be here long." Then, when the door was locked, the detective turned to Malet.

"Now," he said, "I will show you the way out. Af-

ter that I have something to tell you; and after that I want you to show me two things; first, the corpse of the princess, and next, Prince Ivan himself."

CHAPTER VI.

THE SECRETS OF AN EMPIRE.

Nick Carter and Malet were seated together in the little house outside the palace walls.

The detective had already related minutely everything that had happened to him since the time he was locked in the room behind the throne, and of course he had exhibited not only the strangling cord that he carried in his pocket, but the remaining implements that were contained in the box underneath the seat of the easel.

"Now," he said, in conclusion, "we must get down to the facts of the case."

"You cannot do it any too quickly to suit me, old fellow," replied Malet.

"We must build up a theory to work upon, and we must build it upon our joint knowledge of the facts as they exist."

"Sure."

"First, then, I know from what Czar Alexander told me long ago that these passageways were created by his grandfather—that is, by the great-grandfather of the present emperor, and that the secrets of all the passageways, save the one to the library, has been forgotten."

"Yes. Well?"

"Has it not occurred to you that there is one place where a record of these secret passageways would be kept, and where that record would be handed down from one chief to another, and so, never forgotten?"

"In the office of the Third Section, of course."

"Of course."

"And there, only the chief himself would be at all likely to know it."

"Right, Malet, you're getting warm, as we used to say in school."

"We know of two secret entrances and exits connected with the palace. It is likely that there are many more. There is no doubt a record of everyone of them, kept in cipher, in the office of the chief of the Third Section. Therefore, Malet——"

"You want me to finish that sentence?"

"Yes."

"Well, therefore, it follows that the man who used that cord on the throat of the princess was either the prince himself, or somebody sent there to do it for him."

"No; not quite so strong as that."

"What then?"

"Why, simply that the person who did the deed received the information from the prince at some time, but it does not follow necessarily that it was given for this especial deed."

"It might have been a bit of held-over knowledge. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. Is the prince strong enough to talk?"

"Oh, I think so."

"Can you manage the doctors so that I will be permitted to question him?"

"Sure I can."

"Then we will go to him about ten o'clock. He will be strongest at about that hour. Now, tell me. If I were a noble of Russia and desired a private audience with the Czar by means of the room behind the throne, to whom would I be most likely to apply for the permission and the appointment?"

"To one of the five members of the council, to Grand Duke Michael, to one of the ministers, to me, to the czarina, or to the chief of the Third Section, Prince Ivan."

"Exactly. Now to which of these would the princess have been most likely to apply?"

"To me, I should think."

"Well, she did not do that."

"No."

"She would not be likely to go to one of the members of the council."

"No."

"She certainly would not apply to the grand duke, would she?"

"N-no; I do not think so."

"What about the ministers?"

"Nor, I think, to any of them, under the circumstances."

"To the czarina, do you think?"

"Possibly."

"But the appointment was not made. The czar does not know even now that she desired an audience with him. If she had applied to the czarina the appointment would have been made, and the czar would have known about it."

"Assuredly."

"Then it was not to the czarina. That, Malet, reduces us to the prince."

"It does; and I am equally sure that she would not apply to him for the appointment."

"Perhaps not; but it is not equally as certain that he would not pretend to have applied for the appointment for her, or to have pretended to her that the appointment had been made at the request of the czar."

"I don't think I understand. Why should he do that without her request?"

"Isn't it evident to you that the princess was lured to that room so that she might be murdered without leaving a trace of the assassin behind?"

"Yes, it is."

"We do not know that the prince had tired of his wife; but, Yvonne is certain that he killed her, or caused her to be killed. I pretended not to entertain the idea, but I am more than half convinced that she is right."

"But in the light of that theory, how do you account for the attack upon himself? That was no child's play. It was in dead earnest. The man who stuck that knife into him meant to kill him."

"No doubt."

"Well, then?"

"Yvonne calls it a coincidence. We will let it go at that for the present, until we have a better handle to take hold of. Let us return to the main question. Do you recall the history of the other crimes committed in that room?"

"Yes."

"So do I. Each one has been strangled with this [illegible] and Nick held it up for inspection.

"Yes."

"It is a silent weapon and an effective one. The person who used it had first to know that it was there, ready for use."

"I should say so, yes."

"We are convinced that the prince knew it was there. Moreover, we are equally convinced that he knew all about the secret passage, and that he is, in fact, the only person aside from ourselves who does know of it. Now let us touch upon these other crimes, or, rather, only upon the last one before this, for that is the only one that interests us in this case. Do you remember who it was that was killed?"

"Perfectly. It was—— By Jove, Nick, you are right. It was the elder brother of Prince Ivan, from whom he inherited vast estates."

"Exactly. Now, another thing. Yvonne brought to my mind the story that the princess' house was under quarantine because of the report that smallpox raged there. Have you taken measures to ascertain if there was any truth in that report?"

"It was truth enough about the report, but it was a false report."

"And who is responsible for its circulation?"

"Who knows? The princess supposed it to be smallpox, and the house was quarantined; but the disease was not contagious at all. I found that out the day before yesterday."

"The prince again, Malet. Don't you see through it? He meant, under cover of the smallpox scare, to do away with the princess by poison, but his spies informed him that you were investigating. He knew that there would be danger in that method, so he tried this one."

"Yes, yes, I see all that very plainly; but all the time we run up against another proposition. Who stabbed him? He didn't do it himself, that's certain. If he killed his wife himself, he must have done it between half-past four and five in order to have returned to his office in time to have received his own wound at a quarter before six. He must——"

"Why do you hesitate?"

"Wait. Come with me."

Malet leaped to his feet and started in the direction of the secret door which communicated with the passage that led to the Czar's private library.

"Where are you going?" asked Nick, when Malet pressed upon the spring and opened the door in the wall.

"There is a passage which leads off from this one," he said, rapidly. "I have never explored it, although I have started to do so several times. I discovered it by accident one day, when I was on my way to an interview with the Czar. I know now where it leads before I follow it."

"Where?"

"Come with me. I will bet my head that it will take us to the private room of the chief of the Third Section."

"Capital! I would like nothing better than a half hour alone in that room, and it is sure to be unoccupied now—eh?"

"Sure? Faith, nobody, not even his most confidential man would dare to step a foot in that place while the prince lives. It is a room which nobody ever enters but himself, and now we know the reason why."

"Simply because it communicates directly with the palace."

"Sure it does; and with other places as well. With the prison, with all St. Petersburg, I have no doubt. Faith! Nick, that accounts for the mysterious appearances of the prince, and of more than one of his predecessors as well, in places where they were least expected, and when they were supposed to be somewhere else. Sure you have hit the nail on the head."

While they were talking they had also been acting, and as Malet uttered the last remark he threw open a narrow doorway in the wall of the passage.

"Step in," he said. "We'll shut the door behind us, for we won't be back in some time, I'm thinking."

Then, with rapid strides, they made their way along the corridor, down steps which took them beneath the street, and along a dripping tunnel out of which many others branched as they proceeded; but on the theory that the one they followed was the first one to be constructed after the palace was built, they kept in a direct line until at last, after ascending another stairway, they were brought to a halt before an iron-studded door which seemed to be provided with no handle or lock of any kind.

After studying it for a moment, Nick placed his shoulder against it and pushed gently but firmly.

It gave before the pressure, and in another moment the two men were standing together in the private office of the chief of the Third Section, and they saw that the massive and high-topped desk at which the chief was accustomed to sit while engaged in his private work had moved out bodily into the middle of the room, taking with it a raised section of the floor upon which it rested. An ingenious devise, truly, for who would have thought of moving the raised floor as well as the desk, and the desk itself would not move from its place without taking with it its section of the flooring.

"You were right, Malet," said Nick, much elated at the outcome of their adventure. "Here is Prince Ivan's desk; yonder is his private safe; here are all his papers and all his secrets, and I am safe to be uninterrupted in my labors—certainly for several hours to come. It will be strange if I cannot find out all I wish to know before I leave this place."

"I wish I could remain here with you," replied Malet, "but it is almost six o'clock now, and I must make my morning report."

"Make it by all means," said Nick, "and leave me here alone. I can work better and faster so, anyway. When I am through I will return to the little house outside the palace walls, and from there I will go to your house. Between ten and twelve I shall want you to take me to the prince."

When Malet had gone Nick pushed the desk back into place. Then he crossed the room and examined the two doors which opened into it, to see that both were fastened.

Next he crossed to the windows and pulled down the shades so that not a ray of light could escape to warn any chance observer that the room was occupied, and then he turned his attention to the desk.

"The secrets of Russia are within my grasp," he said to himself, smiling with pleasure. "I would gladly

have traveled around the world in order to enjoy the promises of the next hour, for in that time I will know more about the affairs of Russia than the czar himself."

CHAPTER VII.

ORLOFF, THE ANARCHIST ASSASSIN.

It was nearly six o'clock in the morning when Nick Carter began his investigation of the secrets of the private office of the chief of the Third Section, and for two hours thereafter he worked unremittingly.

He did his work systematically, too.

It was not his purpose to disturb affairs so that it would be known that alien hands had tampered with the documents, for he intended to replace everything exactly as he found it, and to leave behind him no suggestion that he or anybody had been there.

Accordingly, before beginning with the documents, he placed conveniently upon the table in the center of the room a large pad of paper, and beside it a pencil. Then, having opened the desk, which was by no means a difficult task, he began at the first pigeonhole and proceeded from that to the other, one by one, pausing at times long enough to step to the table and to make a note upon the pad of anything he had discovered that was worth his recollection. So he traveled across the top line of pigeonholes, then across the second, then the third, then to the drawers and books, then to the memoranda, and so on until there was not a scrap of paper in or upon the desk that had not passed under his eyes; and with that task accomplished to his satisfaction, he closed it again and turned his attention to the safe.

Here again his expertness came into play.

While Nick Carter was still a small lad and under the tutelage of his father, the old man had once made the boast that there was not a combination lock of three or four tumblers in the whole world that his son could not open by placing his ear against the dial and working the lock by the sound.

Well, he had not forgotten his cunning, for the safe door soon swung open, and piece by piece its contents were examined and noted down, as the other facts had been, in the case of the desk.

From the safe, when his work there was completed, he attacked the cabinet of files, and from those he went to other things until there was not an object left in the room, which might have held a secret, that had not given it up to him; and when his task was entirely done—when there was nothing more left for him to examine, he looked at his watch, surprised to discover that more than two hours had elapsed while he was at work.

But the work was done and he was ready to go, so with a last look around to see that he had left no sign of his presence there, he pulled the desk from the wall, and with the many sheets of paper torn from the pad, safely stored away in his pockets, he stepped through and pulled it shut behind him.

When he was back again in Malet's office in the little house he took the papers from his pocket, while for a moment he hesitated in the center of the room, thinking.

"These notes are well enough," he mused, "but they are dangerous things to carry around with me. There is not a thing that I have written down which I will not remember to the end of my days. Shall I destroy these papers? No, I will hide them. They may be useful to Malet."

The floor of the little house was of square blocks of stone, and the one upon which his foot rested at that moment was loose. It was the work of but a moment to loosen it entirely and to lift it from its place.

In the space beneath he deposited the papers, and then, having readjusted the stone, he noted its locality by counting the others from it to the sides and ends of the room. Then he felt for his pencil to make a memorandum, and paused.

He had left his pencil in the office of the Third Section.

"Well," he mused, "I wouldn't have believed that I would do such a thing as that; now there is only one thing to do, and that is to go back and get it. That was an American pencil—a Dixon—and I'll wager there isn't another like it in Russia. It won't do to have it found in that office. I must get it."

He hurried through the underground passage, for truth to tell he was hungry, and beside his breakfast

there were other things to which he wished to give his attention before he went with Malet to interview the prince.

He smiled grimly when he thought of that interview and of what it portended.

It is safe to say that there was scarcely a secret connected with the career of Prince Ivan with which Nick Carter was not familiar at that moment, for investigation of the desk, of the safe, of the cabinet, of the personal diary of appointments, of the daily journal of incidents and events, of the private blotter, etc., had posted him upon every point.

Even the secret of the stabbing itself was at the detective's disposal, and he knew now that the prince himself knew who stabbed him—that he had lied when he said that he did not even see the man who struck him.

"I know who killed every person who has met with death in that room behind the throne," he was thinking to himself as he pushed against the door in the wall that would admit him to the office of the prince, "and, my dear prince, that was a very clever scheme of yours—a very clever scheme, indeed, but it won't work out to the end."

The desk swung out into the room and Nick Carter stepped through the opening.

In order to pass into the room from behind the desk he was obliged to half turn, pass four feet to the left, and then out from behind the high desk.

He did so unthinkingly.

It did not occur to him that the room might have been entered by another since he left it. He had been so entirely undisturbed during his two hours or more there, that it did not occur to him to be more than ordinarily cautious.

The table was in front of him. His pencil was on the table. He reached out one hand and took it, placed it in his pocket, and then——

A crushing blow fell upon his head from behind, and he sank to the floor in a heap, and that without a bit of warning and without an idea of what had struck him.

* * * * * * *

When consciousness returned to Nick Carter, he was still in the private office of Prince Ivan.

He opened his eyes very carefully at first, for he had no idea where he was or who was watching him, but he speedily became convinced that he was alone. Then he opened them as wide as possible and attempted to rise.

He discovered, however, that he could move nothing but his head, for his ankles were tied tightly together, and again to the chair in which he had been placed. To the chair, also, his arms and body were bound, with turn after turn of good stout rope, and after a second effort—for he was still weak from the effect of the blow he had received—he sank back into the cushions, limply.

"Whoever tied me here knew his business," he mused. "I wonder who it was? I wonder if by any possibility I could get loose before he returns? I suppose not. He will look out for that. He wouldn't have tied me up here to let me get a way again, I imagine. Hello! Whoever he is, there he comes."

The man who entered the room at that moment was a small, wiry individual, smooth shaven, and with piercing black eyes and beetling brows. He was rather short of stature, but immensely broad of shoulder, and his arms, unusually long, hung limply at his side, after the manner of men of great strength who have little or no use for their powers.

He entered the room stealthily through one of the doors that Nick had looked before he began his investigations, but the detective noticed when he opened it that the casing sparred with the door, so that the lock was utterly useless if one knew the secret of opening the casing with the door.

"How is your head?" he asked, abruptly, in Russian, striding across to Nick and glowering down upon him.

"Sore," replied Nick.

"Well, be patient. It won't pain you much longer."

"No? Why not?"

"I'm going to cut it off," and the man smiled grimly.

"When?" asked Nick.

"Oh! presently, when I have time."

"Why didn't you knock it off while you were about it, and save yourself a lot of trouble?" asked Nick.

"I meant to, but it was too precious hard for that. Besides, I wanted to talk to you."

"Oh! did you? What about?"

"About that passageway. Where does it lead?"

"Don't you know?"

"If I did I wouldn't stop to ask, would I? And, besides, if I did know you wouldn't be alive to answer me. I'd have cut your throat as soon as I knocked you down."

"You're a pleasant sort of a fellow to have around, aren't you?" said Nick.

"Never mind that. I want an answer. If you want to escape with your life, you had best tell me all I want to know."

"You are also a good and genial sort of a liar, aren't you?" asked Nick. "You mean to cut my head off, anyway, I suppose, but you are willing to let me live a little longer if I will tell you about that passageway, eh?"

"Take it any way you please. I don't know who you are, and I don't care. You wear a uniform that I hate, and that is enough."

"Oh! The palace guard," said Nick.

"Yes. The palace guard. I hate it. I hate everybody who wears uniforms."

"Then let me suggest that you try wearing one yourself. If you didn't love yourself quite so much you would be a whole lot more agreeable as a companion."

The stranger grunted imperturbably.

"Pish!" he said. "I repeat, I do not know who you are, and I care less. You cannot anger me. You are helpless and you are in my power. I intend to kill you later, perhaps—it depends upon yourself."

"Does it? Perhaps you will make a little surer of me than you did of Prince Ivan—eh?"

"That was a botch, but my foot slipped," returned the stranger, calmly. "Did Ivan tell you that I did it?"

"I have not seen him," said Nick.

"No? Then how did you know about it?"

"Call it guessing. I thought your description tallied with Sacha Orloff, that is all."

"I am Orloff. What of it? I knew how to get into this room, for he has shown me how many times, although he was not aware of it when he did so. He should not have brought me here if he did not want me to discover the secret of how to get here. Bah! he is a fool!"

"Yes. I grant you that—a great fool; and he came mighty near being a dead one, too, didn't he?"

"It was a botch, I tell you. My foot slipped. I wonder if he has told who struck him?"

"No, he has not told."

"Then I needn't have hidden here and half starved, need I? Oh! well, what's the difference! I knew that nobody would dare to enter this room in his absence, and so after I struck him I came here. I have been here ever since, except early this morning I had to go out for something to eat. Then, when I returned, I had been here but a moment when I saw the desk begin to move out from the wall. I had been looking for that secret entrance ever since I have been here, but I could not find it. I knew, when I saw the desk move, that the secret was about to be revealed to me. I got my knife ready and stood to one side, low down, so you could not see me. I meant to strike you to the heart, and then I remembered that perhaps I ought to stun you instead of killing you—that perhaps there were other secrets which you might be able to tell me if you were not dead."

"No, I couldn't very well tell them if I were dead, could I?"

"No. So I decided to let you live—a while."

"Thanks, awfully. That was very kind of you."

"Pish! Where does the secret passage lead?"

"To the czar."

Orloff leaped to his feet in ecstasy and uttered a cry of delight.

"At last! at last! at last!" he cried. "To the czar! You shall show me the way to him, and then, perhaps, I will not kill you."

"Bosh!" said Nick. "You'll get us both killed if you yell like that. Somebody will hear you, and I as-

sure you they would kill me as quickly as they would you if I were caught in this place. You think I am a palace guard, Orloff, but I am not. Pull off my whiskers and my wig, and you will find that I am not even a Russian. In fact, Orloff, I strongly suspect that we are both here on the same errand. Instead of hitting an enemy on the head when you floored me, you struck a friend; so just take out your knife and slip these cords before I lose my temper. When I am free I'll show you the way to the czar. We will go to him together, Orloff."

CHAPTER VIII.

"I WILL SHOW YOU THE WAY TO THE CZAR."

Orloff did not move. He did not even smile. Indeed, his entire demeanor was as if he had somehow forgotten how to smile.

"No," he said. "Not yet. First prove to me that you are a friend. Then, perhaps, I will cut your bonds."

"Well, anyhow, pull off the whiskers and the wig. You can do that."

"Yes, I will do that," and he suited the action to the word. "Ha!" he exclaimed. "You are young—quite young—younger than I am."

"I'm more than seven," said Nick.

"Of course you are. I never doubted that," responded Orloff, and Nick understood that he had no understanding for facetiousness. "Prove that you are a friend," he added.

The memoranda obtained from Prince Ivan's papers was still fresh in the recollection of the detective—he had gone over it so lately; and he had found much there which concerned a certain Sacha Orloff—enough to make him certain that it was not only Orloff who had saddled the prince, but that the prince knew the name of his would-be assassin; also, there had been much there concerning the private history of Orloff—so much that the man himself would have been astonished to know how well posted the Third Section kept itself.

"Shall I tell plainly?" asked Nick.

"Yes. Quite plainly."

"Very well, your name is not Orloff at all. Shall I tell you what it is?"

"No. If you know it keep it to yourself. If you uttered it I might lose my temper and kill you."

"I see. Well, you are of noble family—a bad egg—a nihilist—an anarchist. You have been selected to put the czar to sleep, and also your orders were to do the same service for Prince Ivan, but you failed in that."

"It was a botch, I tell you; a botch. My foot slipped."

"Ay, and it is likely to slip again when you get to the czar."

"Pish, man! I will cut your throat if you suggest that."

"While I am here, helpless?"

"Why not? It is only a throat. But go on. I listen."

"By Jove!" thought Nick. "He is about the coldest proposition I ever tackled. I don't believe he has got an emotion left inside him." Aloud, he said:

"I was sent here to find you."

Now there was nothing in all the languages of the earth which Nick might have said that would have performed the service for him that was accomplished by that one remark, for it opened wide the door to their further conversation. Orloff believed that all the city of St. Petersburg was looking for him, and he knew that only his own secret society knew where he was hiding. He had sent word to his friends there, therefore if this man who was bound down in the chair had been sent to find him, he could only have been sent by the friends who knew where he was hiding.

For the first time since the interview began, his eyes glowed for one instant with the suggestion of a sparkle.

"Then my message was received?" he said. "Good! But you are not a member with me; you are not even a Russian. Why were you sent?"

"Because I knew the way through the palace. I could come to you in this room without any person being the wiser; and when I did come you rapped me on the head by way of welcome."

"True. I am sorry But it will stop aching after a little. Now I will release you. Are you armed?"

"Certainly."

"Well, it doesn't matter. I am stronger than you are—stronger than any other man I ever met. Did my friends tell you that?"

"Yes."

"If you try to play any tricks I will squeeze you to death, or cut you. There! Stretch yourself and sit down again. We will talk more pleasantly. Now what did my friends say when they sent you here?"

"They said that if you did not strike the czar any more surely than you did the prince, that your whole expedition would be a failure. They sent me here to help you."

"But not to take the work out of my hands?"

"No. As I said, to help you."

"Good! If I were to give up the work to you I would kill you first and then myself, and our friends could do the other work. I botched with the prince, but I won't fail with the czar."

"Of course you will not."

"Thank you. Now shall we go through the passage to the czar?"

"By no means. Not till to-night. It cannot be done in the daytime."

"Very well. We will wait; but in the meantime you will show me about the passages."

"Certainly. That is what I came here to do."

"Shall we go now? Through the door behind the desk? That is clever. I tried to move the desk many times, but it would not move at all, and yet—ha! if you know how to do it, it moves with ease."

"All things are easy when one knows how they are done."

"Shall we go now?"

"Yes, if you will promise to be guided by me."

"How be guided? What do you mean? Are you to take the work from me?"

"No, I say. When to-night comes, you shall do the work with your own hands, but you are not to do it until I say the word. If you are precipitate, you will spoil all. If you attack too soon, this will be botched like the other. If you wait until I say 'strike,' there will be nothing in the way of the blow."

"Good! I believe you; I will wait."

"You will be guided by me?"

"Yes; until to-night—until you show me the way to the czar."

"Then come. We will go through the passage. I will show you the way. Then, when I have shown it to you, we will return here. Then, after that, I will leave you until evening."

"Leave me! Why?"

"Because I have other things to do. I have found you as I was directed to do."

"But you are to help me; you are to show me the way to the czar."

"Exactly. You did not permit me to finish what I was saying."

"Well, say on."

"After we return here I will leave you; but at ten o'clock to-night I will return. At ten the czar goes to his library. He is alone there for many hours each night. I know the secret way into the library. The door opens noiselessly. I will take you there and open the door for you. He will not hear it. He will be seated with his back toward you. You can approach him on tiptoe. He will not hear. He will not know that you are there until you strike, and then, if you do not botch it as you did the other, he will never know that you were there at all."

Nick talked slowly and impressively, for his object was to win entirely the confidence of Orloff, and he knew that there could be no way so sure as to feed him

upon the theme of his madness; and this man, while sane in other respects, had thought upon the death of the czar for so long a time that the consummation of it had become a mania with him.

And his words had the desired effect. The sullen, sullen eyes of the nihilist glowed with eagerness, and he breathed more quickly while Nick talked to him.

"It is well," he said, rising. "I am glad you came. I am also sorry that I hurt your head."

"Never mind that," said Nick.

"I have forgotten it," replied Orloff. "Now let us go. I am anxious to see the passage, or as much of it as you are willing to show me—now. To-night I will see it all."

"Yes, to-night you shall see it all, Orloff."

Then they pulled the desk from the wall and together disappeared through the door behind it; but this time, as the other, Nick closed it after him.

"You have only to push against it to open it," he said to Orloff; then he led the way through the passage in the direction of the little house outside the palace walls.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CONFESSIONS OF A PRINCE.

It was half-past ten o'clock when Nick arrived at the house where Malet lived, for he had taken the time to conduct Orloff to the little house outside the palace walls, and to return with him again to the office of Ivan. Then, having received his positive promise that he would remain there until the return of the detective, Nick hurried away.

"Working my way on of that fat ugly goes to show what a countess will do in an emergency," was his self-congratulatory comment.

But there was a surprise in store for him at the house of Malet.

As soon as he entered the house and had been greeted by Malet, who was awaiting him, he inquired for Yvonne.

"Nick," said Malet, "it's bad news for you I've got, I'm thinking. Sure the countess is not here."

"Not here? Where is she, then?"

"Well, she's gone."

"Confound it, man! Can't you tell me what is on your mind without going around Robin Hood's barn to do it? Where is she?"

"Well, it's like this. When I got home I found things in a muddle here. Sure, the countess hadn't been here an hour when there was a rap at the door. My wife supposed you had returned and she opened it without question, whereupon three men forced their way into the house. There were others outside, waiting ready to help them if they wanted it. They didn't say a word except to ask where the countess was, and sure they called her by name at that; and she heard them. She had changed her clothes and was dressed in some that belong to my wife, which fitted her quite well, and when she heard her name, blowed it she didn't come into the room; and when she did that they didn't do a thing but grab onto and drag her away before the eyes of my wife, saying that it was in the name of the czar."

"And was it? You should have been able to find out that much before this?"

"Sure, I can't find a trace of her anywhere."

"Well," said Nick, "I know whose orders took her away from here, and I think I know where she is at this moment."

"So do I, by the powers!"

"The grand duke."

"The same."

"And he has doubtless had her conveyed to that small house of his where I faced him once before. He doesn't know that Nick Carter is in the city now, and

he thinks he's going to have an easy time with his plots, but I think I know a way to checkmate him. Malet, it was the grand duke who sent her the telegram with Ivan's name signed to it. He knew it would bring her here. In some way he managed to spot her when she left the train, and lost her before she entered the little house under the palace wall. But his men saw her when she came out with me. They followed us at the time."

"Well, what shall we do? I am under your orders, Nick."

"We'll wait till night, and then we'll go after her. I happen to know that the grand duke has other fish to fry during the day, to-day. He will not be able to intrude himself upon her before late this evening. Please God! I will be there to receive him when he arrives."

"You're a wonder, Nick," said Malet, admiringly. "Things that seem absolutely impossible until you come upon the scene, fade away into thin air the minute you arrive."

"I could make a good many things in Russia fade away into thin air to-day if I were so disposed," retorted Nick. "I did not spend almost three hours among the papers in Prince Ivan's office for nothing. Look here, Charley, I'm going to tell you a secret."

"Faith, I'm listening."

"There is a loose stone in the floor of your office in the little house. It is the eighth from the north end and the fifth from the west side of the room. If ever you get into very great trouble with any of the ministers, members of the council, or with anybody in St. Petersburg, move that stone and read what is under it."

"I'll do that."

"But don't go to it unless you are obliged to—at least until after I have left Russia. After that you can apply to the stone whenever you please."

"All right, Nick. Now, what next?"

"Take me to Prince Ivan, and no matter how sick he is, if he is not delirious leave me alone with him for a little while."

"I have arranged for that already."

"Good. Afterward we will visit the body of the princess."

* * * * * * *

Prince Ivan was a typical Russian.

In stature he was a giant. A blond beard almost covered his face, and his heavy eyebrows seemed to add to the habitual frown he carried about with him.

When Nick Carter stood beside his bed in the Royal Hospital and looked down upon him, he thought he discovered at a glance that the injuries of the prince were not as serious as the public had been led to suppose they were. He was pale, of course. The great loss of blood he had suffered would account for that; and he was weak, but his eyes were bright and there was almost all of the old spirit, of courage, defiance and aggressiveness, even in the manner and aspect of the recumbent figure.

Malet introduced Nick to the prince simply as a special detective whose services he had called into the case, and as one who believed he could find the prince's assailant. Then, taking the others with him, he withdrew from the room.

The reader must remember that Malet had told Nick that the prince had not been informed of the death of the princess; that in his weak condition it had been thought best to keep the knowledge of her assassination from him until he was stronger and therefore better able to bear the shock.

When Malet and the others left the room Nick drew a chair beside the bed, and having seated himself upon it, said:

"Your highness, Malet sent for me as soon as he could do so after you were hurt. He related all the circumstances connected with the crime, with which he

was familiar, and I think I may already say that I have quite a clear idea about the identity of the person who stabbed you."

"Well, who was it? Don't bandy words," demanded the prince, gruffly, but weakly.

"Sacha Orloff," replied Nick, boldly, coming to the point at once.

The prince started and his eyes narrowed into slits as he peered up, almost in affright, at the detective.

"What do you know about Orloff?" he gasped.

"I know," said Nick, coolly, "that you have pretended to employ him for the last four years; that you have made him think that you sympathized with his passion to assassinate the czar; that time after time you have promised him that the day was near when he might do the deed; that, in fact, you meant that he should do it when you considered the time was ripe, and that you intended that the czar should be really put out of the way so that another could succeed him. Hush! prince. Don't call out for the others to come, because I have taken good care that they will not come. We are alone and we will remain alone until I am through with you, but it will not be long."

"Who are you? Who are you?" gasped the prince.

"Never mind that now. It is enough that I am here. I know that you have plotted the death of the czar. I know that you have plotted to put another on the throne in his place—the other one who would naturally succeed him, but I do not know, and I do not want to know—in fact, I do not believe that that other has plotted with you in this hellish scheme. But that you have plotted it, I do know. Now what have you got to say to all this?"

"Nothing. But stop. Since you say you know so much, perhaps you will not mind telling me how you know it."

"Not at all. I have read and copied every paper in your private office. I have gone over every letter which you did not destroy. Do you realize now how much I know?"

"You lie! You do this—you say this to frighten me into talking."

"Do I? Who killed your wife, the princess?"

"Nobody. She is not dead."

The prince spoke easily and coolly. He did not attempt to deny that he already knew that somebody who was thought to be the princess was dead. The cool admission startled Nick, for it told him an entirely different tale from the one he had imagined. It told him, in fact, that the man who had killed the princess in the room behind the throne had done so, believing that the woman he struck was not the princess at all, but her sister, the countess; and in this he saw a plot within a plot. Here was an explanation of the telegram to the countess; here, in fact, was an entire explanation of everything.

The prince had been led to suppose that the countess had not departed from St. Petersburg. He had been made to think that Yvonne had remained in the city after she was supposed to have left it; he had been convinced that she was impersonating her sister, his wife, and that in the name of the princess she sought an audience with the czar. The cool denial of the prince that the princess was dead was a revelation to the detective.

"You know that somebody died very suddenly in the room behind the throne, do you not?" he asked, quickly.

"Well? And if I do, what then?"

"Who do you suppose it was?"

"If you, who appear to know so much, cannot answer that question, do not ask me," retorted the prince.

"You believe it to have been Yvonne, the princess' sister?"

"I know it. I do not believe it, I know it."

Nick drew the strangling cord from his pocket and held it before the eyes of the prince.

"Did you ever see this before?" he inquired.

The prince shuddered.

"I see that you recognize it," said Nick.

The prince smiled grimly, defiantly, coldly.

"I don't know who you are, sir," he said, "and I care less. I do know that you were sent here for a purpose, and therefore I do know that you have managed to find out all my secrets. Very well. You have given me a taste of the sort of thing I have been dealing out to others for years. It is only fair, I suppose. Somebody has betrayed me. Perhaps I know who has done it, but even if I do I shall mention no names. I have been betrayed, that is enough. I must die. If I get up from this bed I go to Siberia; ergo, I will not get up. You know already that I blindfolded Orloff and led him through the passages to the room behind the throne. How you know all this, I cannot tell, but I see that you do know it. You know that I ordered him to strangle the countess as a necessary preliminary to the murder of the czar. You know that when we returned to my office and I left him there, that he, knowing the secret of opening the casing of the door into the hallway, followed me out into the corridor and stabbed me as I was passing out of the front door, and therefore you know why I would not tell who it was who struck me. He is there in my office; but of course, since you have examined my papers, you know that also, and you have captured him. You know a lot, don't you? Well, it is enough for my ruin, and I will die here. Nobody, not even the man who betrayed me to you, shall have it to say that I was afraid of the consequences of what I did."

"You ordered the assassination of the woman you supposed to be Yvonne, did you not?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"That woman was your wife, not her sister, Yvonne. Yvonne was on the train with me between here and Paris when that crime was committed."

"You lie."

"I do not lie. It is the truth. You ordered the assassination of your own wife."

"You lie."

"I know that the princess is dead. I know that Yvonne lives. I am not deceiving you. I know what I say to be the truth."

The prince, weak as he was, half raised himself upon one elbow.

"Swear it," he demanded.

"I swear it, prince."

The prince sank back again and closed his eyes.

"I believe you," he said. "Go now. I shall not say another word to you, or to anybody. I am through with life and all that pertains to life. I believe you. It is enough. I am as guilty of the murder of my own wife as if I had strangled her myself. The man who betrayed me has had his victory over me. Orloff is avenged. To-morrow I will be dead. Go. Leave me in peace."

CHAPTER X.

THE LITTLE GIANT SHOWS HIS STRENGTH.

"Malet," said the detective, when they were again in the house of the chief of the palace guard, "I begin to realize that I have not closed my eyes in sleep for more than seventy-two hours. I want a little rest and added strength. I have decided that we will not view the body of the princess until we can take Yvonne with us, and that will not be before to-morrow. There is so much for us to do to-night and nothing at all to do for the balance of the day, therefore I shall sleep. Call me at five o'clock."

"All right. And then?"

"We will go to the house where Yvonne is imprisoned and rescue her. It cannot be done in daylight, and, besides, I have a fancy for an interview with

grand duke. That cannot be had until night, for I happen to know that he is otherwise engaged to-day. It is a fortunate thing for Yvonne that it is so, too."

"Faith, it is that."

"At ten, or very soon after, to-night, I must meet Orloff, the strangler; Orloff, the murderer; Orloff, the would-be regicide; Orloff, the cold; Orloff, the passionless; Orloff, the butcher. Malet, I have never encountered a man like him in all my experience. He has not a passion left in him, not even a passion for murder. He kills as he would cut a loaf of bread, without emotion. He is a machine which the devil operates—a mechanical murderer. When one refers to murder, he says 'Pish!' When we arrest him and he knows that he must suffer for the crimes he has committed, he will shrug his shoulders, think he has made another botch of his work and say 'Pish!' Call me at five."

* * * * * * *

Nick Carter and Malet went alone to the house where the detective was assured that Yvonne was a prisoner. There was a gate through the garden wall which they had had occasion to make use of before that night, and to which Malet carried a key, so they had no difficulty in obtaining admittance, and from the garden they soon gained access to the house. The hour was then barely seven in the evening—a half hour or more before the grand duke could arrive.

Apparently there was not a servant in the house. At all events, the lower floor was untenanted; but when they made their way up the stairs, and were passing along the hall on the second floor, they were presently confronted by a woman who stood before them with her hands on her hips and barred their way.

She was captured with fifty rubles, and with the coins jingling in her pocket she permitted herself to be locked in a room on the ground floor, while the two men took possession of the house. From her was also obtained the key to the room where Yvonne was confined.

When they opened the door Yvonne turned from her restless pacing up and down and confronted them. In her right hand she held a pistol, which she afterward told them she had discovered in the room, where it had been forgotten, and her eyes blazed with determination when she raised it and pointed it at Nick.

But it was instantly lowered, flung upon the floor, in fact, and she leaped forward with a glad cry when she recognized the detective.

And then the brave and almost dauntless woman laid her head upon Nick's shoulder and sobbed out her relief.

"If it had been the grand duke I would have shot him," she said, between her sobs. "I had determined to do that the moment he appeared. Now you are here and I am safe. Oh! this has been a terrible day. I have been in this room almost fifteen hours, and it seems like fifteen years. But I am safe now, and you have saved me. Ah! what do I not owe to you?"

Nick was not disguised, and his handsome face shone with pleasure; but as he looked down into her eyes that were raised to his as trustingly as a child's, he turned away again.

"Yvonne," he said, tenderly, but with just a faint touch of coldness, which he purposely introduced into his tones, "you must compose yourself at once, for the grand duke will be here in a moment and we must be ready to receive him. Malet will take you into another room. I will wait here alone for your expected visitor."

"But he will attack you. He will kill you!" she cried.

"I don't think so," replied Nick, smiling.

"He is a giant in strength," she insisted.

"Is he? Oh! very well. I will await him just the

same. Go with Malet now. Remember, you promised to be guided by me."

"Guided by you?" She came near to him again and rested her hands upon his shoulders, looking into his eyes with an expression that he could not mistake. But she controlled herself.

"God bless you!" she whispered, and turned away and followed Malet from the room.

As soon as he was alone Nick stepped behind the fire screen and waited the coming of the grand duke.

He had not long to wait. Scarcely half an hour had passed ere his heavy tread was heard upon the stairs, and presently a key rattled in the lock. Then the door opened, and the big man crossed the threshold and closed and locked the door behind him.

For a moment he glared around the room, evidently surprised at not discovering his prisoner; but his eyes lighted upon the fire screen and instantly he started toward it.

"You are hiding, are you?" he cried, as he seized the screen and dashed it to the floor. Then he leaped several feet backward with a cry of amazement and anger, for insead of Yvonne, whom he had expected to discover, Nick Carter stood smilingly before him.

The grand duke did not hesitate an instant.

With a low exclamation of rage he launched himself forward. In his anger he never thought of the weapons he carries in his pockets; or it is possible that he relied more upon the exercise of his great strength than upon firearms. At all events, he leaped forward and seized the detective in his grasp.

Nick had not expected this. He had looked for a moment of parley before it came to a question of fight; but he was nevertheless prepared for it.

When the great, bear-like arms of the grand duke circled around him, he braced every muscle like a trained wrestler, and it must have seemed to the duke as if he had grasped an iron post, so little impression did he make upon the man he had seized.

He lifted Nick bodily from the floor and attempted to throw him away from him, but Nick, instead, landed upon his feet, and then, with a mighty effort, ducked a little and secured a hold around the grand duke's body.

For an instant they both strained to break the hold of the other one, and then, gradually, the duke's grasp became looser. That terrific hugging was driving the breath from his body.

He struggled with all his might, but uselessly. The hold became tighter and tighter, and after a moment, notwithstanding his great weight, the grand duke felt that he was being lifted off his feet.

Up and up he came until his feet were clear of the floor, and then, almost as if he were a child in the grasp of a giant—which, in truth, he was, notwithstanding that he was almost twice as large as Nick—he was suddenly raised still higher, turned like a mannikin and hurled to the floor with a force that shook the building and stunned him into half-consciousness.

And there he laid, looking up at Nick and blinking his eyes stupidly.

Before he could move Nick had snapped irons upon his wrists and ankles. Then he raised him from the floor and threw rather than seated him in a chair.

"We have met before, sir," said Nick, coldly. "No doubt you remember it. Whether you do or not makes no difference. I have two or three things to say to you before I leave you for your servant to release. If your exalted rank and position did not exempt you from the punishment you so richly deserve, or if I had you in America, where I would like to have you, the hangman's rope or the electric chair would be your portion. You can bet your life on that. As it is, I have no other recourse than to let you go free, for even the czar would not punish you as you deserve."

"Why, in——"

"Never mind who I am. Let us consider who and what you are. You are the greatest and the most despicable scoundrel on the face of the earth. That is enough. Let me tell you two or three things. Yvonne is free. She knows, of course, who sent her the telegram to lure her back to Russia. A murder had to be committed to do that, and the man who instigated that murder sent the telegram. Orloff has confessed. Prince Ivan has confessed, but only to me, so far. I see that touches you. I know every secret of your plot with Ivan. Ivan knows that you have betrayed him. I have every secret——"

"But I have not betrayed him."

"He thinks you have. It is the same thing. I have every secret of his office. The papers have been copied, certified to, and are in my possession. At the least sign from you after this day, they will be placed in the hands of the czar. You know what that will mean—if he should ever know the details of the plot hatched up between you and Ivan. That is all I have to say. To-morrow the murder of the princess will be known. Orloff will suffer the penalty for it, because he did the actual deed. Yvonne shall walk the streets of St. Petersburg free and unmolested and attend to her dead sister as she pleases. If she is bothered in any way whatever, the papers go to the czar. If she is not, they remain where they are until you attempt more of your plots; then—but we will wait till then. I will send your servant to release you now."

Nick turned his back and went out of the room.

* * * * * * *

The capture of Orloff occurred without difficulty.

At ten o'clock that night Nick met him, as he had promised, and conducted him through the secret passage to the little house; but when they arrived there both were pounced upon and captured by men who were lying in wait for them, and Orloff was led away, believing that his companion in crime had met with the same unpleasant experience that had come to him, for Nick permitted himself to be bound and shackled in order to carry out the deception.

As Orloff stood in the room of the little house with the shackles on his wrists and feet, he looked across at Nick and something that resembled a grim smile appeared on his cold features.

"Pish!" he said. "We have made another botch of it. I am not sure whether you did it, or if it is just an accident. Anyhow, it is a botch. Pish!"

Then he was led away.

* * * * * * *

The following morning, when Nick, accompanied by Yvonne, was on his way to view the body of the princess, newsboys in the street were announcing almost in the same breath an account of the murder of the princess by Orloff, and the death of the prince by the hand of the same assassin.

The account said that his wound had opened anew during the night, but Nick and Malet, as well as the doctors who attended him, knew that he had torn it open himself in order that he might not live to meet with just punishment for his crimes.

THE END.

"Holding Up a Nation; or, The Little Giant Rules the World" is the title of No. 382 of the Nick Carter Weekly (New Series), which will be the next issue of the amazing adventures of the great detective. This, in many respects, is the most remarkable and thrilling of all of Nick Carter's experiences so far published. The story tells of a mysterious crime that has been committed at the instigation of government officials against a noble family, and describes how each member of that family was made to suffer because of the crime. The great and self-sacrificing love of a beautiful woman for the detective, who cannot return her love, is an important and intensely interesting feature of this story. The heroine of the story is one whom we have met before—none other than the dashing, fearless, even heroic, Yvonne de Tierrey. Every reader of the Nick Carter stories should read No. 382.

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